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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fifty-second session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 559th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 4 October 2001, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr YIMER (Ethiopia)
(Vice-Chairman)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

REPORT ON THE MEETING OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS HELD PRIOR TO THE SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

1. Ms. FELICE (International Council of Voluntary Agencies) said that the work of the meeting of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) held prior to the session of the Executive Committee had been based on four major themes: partnership between non-governmental organizations and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; the role of NGOs in the international refugee protection regime; questions relating to migration, asylum and trafficking in people; and the protection of internally displaced persons. Most participants, in their statements, had acknowledged the importance of the Global Consultations launched by UNHCR, referred to the repercussions in terms of xenophobia and racism of the events of 11 September, and expressed concern that the legitimate fight against terrorism might well harm the interests of refugees with genuine protection needs. Although critical of UNHCR, NGOs had made it clear that they wished to see a strong agency with the resources it needed to discharge its role willing to mount a vigorous defence of the cause of refugees. She invited all States to send delegations to the next meeting of NGOs, which could take the form of a tripartite session with representatives of Governments, UNHCR and NGOs.

2. Mr. ALFELD (South Africa) said that, despite scheduling difficulties, he had participated in the important meeting of NGOs. It would be preferable for the following meeting to be scheduled for a date that would allow all States to send representatives.

STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE STAFF COUNCIL OF UNHCR

3. Mr. HUSSAIN (Chairperson of the Staff Council of UNHCR) said that at a time when all eyes were on Afghanistan, his colleagues were already busy on the ground, preparing to deal with the incipient humanitarian crisis and assist victims. He called on all States to respond generously to the appeal recently made by UNHCR for US$ 268 million, an amount that was justified by the enormous needs. While financial and material resources were needed to address the crisis, human resources were still more necessary. The new crisis had come at a time when UNHCR was significantly reducing its staffing levels in the context of Action 2. But, as the Staff Council had repeatedly pointed out, UNHCR should strive for "rightsizing" rather than downsizing. The nature of the agency's work, dealing with unforeseen, large-scale emergencies, meant that its staffing must be kept at a level that enabled it to deploy enough experienced staff, at least to cover the gap until more were recruited. In that connection any new recruitment must improve geographical distribution in the Professional category and preserve the international character of the staff of UNHCR.

4. Staff security was another important issue. The senior management of UNHCR had a responsibility to ensure a balance between the need to protect and assist refugees, especially in difficult locations, and the need to safeguard the lives of staff in the field. Security measures should benefit both international and local staff, especially when it came to evacuation. It was equally important to ensure that the morale of staff was maintained in what were demanding times. Post cuts and continued human resources management problems over the past 20 months

had tested the morale of the staff, who sought greater job stability and an improvement in the postings and rotation system.

5. Constructive staff-management relations were also clearly crucial. He welcomed the fact that the new High Commissioner had shown a willingness to engage in dialogue with the staff, a positive attitude that should extend to all levels of management. Lastly, he urged Governments to facilitate, by means of less restrictive visa practices, the entry into or transit through their territory of United Nations personnel so as not to impair the operational effectiveness of UNHCR. He also appealed for tolerance, so that, in the aftermath of the tragic events of 11 September, refugees and asylum-seekers of certain nationalities or from certain religious backgrounds were not discriminated against.

6. Mr. ALFELD (South Africa) paid tribute to the courage of UNHCR staff members, who displayed exceptional dedication in the most difficult situations. He endorsed the appeal by the Chairperson of the Staff Council for improved security measures for local staff.

REPORTS RELATING TO PROGRAMME OVERSIGHT (agenda item 7) (continued) (A/AC.96/946 and A/AC.96/947)

7. Mr. GHELEW (Switzerland) noted with satisfaction that the general policy document issued by UNHCR (A/AC.96/947) met his delegation's principal expectations, in particular regarding the emphasis placed on self-evaluation and decentralization of that function within UNHCR. Nevertheless he noted the ambitious objectives assigned to the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) and drew attention to the delicate issue of effective responsibility, at headquarters and in the field, for implementation of recommendations pursuant to evaluations initiated by UNHCR. The matter should be given further consideration, so that in future UNHCR could integrate the results of evaluations at all levels. Lastly, his delegation trusted that the mechanisms established for joint evaluation would be further refined to ensure that UNHCR's objectives in the evaluation of a specific activity or project did not diverge from those of its partners.

8. Mr. KUTCH (Australia) welcomed the progress made by UNHCR on evaluation; there was little doubt that the new mechanisms put in place would improve the quality of evaluation activities. Nevertheless he regretted the fact that the policy document prepared by UNHCR (A/AC.96/947) gave no indication of the level of evaluation activity anticipated or of the related level of expenditure. His delegation agreed with that of Canada that it would be appropriate to allocate, for example, 0.5 per cent of the budget to evaluation activities. Evaluation activities were a management function, and should appear in the budget.

9. Ms. REITZ (United States of America) noted with satisfaction the steps taken by UNHCR to promote self-evaluation. Field staff must be actively involved in evaluations and learn from them. Her delegation welcomed the establishment of the Evaluation Advisory Committee, in which the United States was willing to participate, and noted the importance of linking the evaluation function with senior-level decision-making and oversight. Evaluation must lead to behavioural and policy change. She welcomed the real-time evaluation of the Afghan situation. Her delegation looked forward to the final evaluation reports on refugee

women and children, and wished to know how UNHCR intended to follow up on the evaluations.

10. Ms. OLLESTAD (Norway) welcomed the formulation by UNHCR of an evaluation policy and noted with satisfaction that it was based on OECD/DAC guidelines. She wished to have an indication of what percentage of the budget would be allocated to evaluation. She welcomed the efforts to integrate such cross-cutting issues, as security, protection of vulnerable groups and gender issues into all UNHCR's activities, but noted that much remained to be done before such questions were truly organizational priorities.

11. Ms. BLOCH (International Council of Voluntary Agencies) expressed concern that the financial commitment to evaluation made in earlier drafts of the evaluation policy was no longer there. Her organization intended to participate in the Evaluation Advisory Committee. She looked forward to the final reports on the impact of UNHCR activities for refugee women and children, and noted that the central problem was policy implementation. An effort should be made to resolve the implementation problem on a collaborative basis, for example in the context of the Action for the Rights of Children project. Consideration could also be given to making implementation a key theme in the Global Consultations on Children scheduled for 2002.

12. Mr. KLASTBERG (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)) confirmed that UNICEF wished to cooperate with UNHCR in education for refugee children; joint meetings would be organized to formulate a detailed work plan. The evaluation of operations in Afghanistan in the Inter-agency Standing Committee was a first step towards strengthening evaluation mechanisms.

13. Ms. BLOMBERG (Sweden) welcomed the steps taken by UNHCR to make evaluation a strategic management function. In that context she asked whether the head of the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit would form part of senior management, whether the Evaluation Advisory Committee would have purely advisory functions, and what the responsibility of senior management in responding to evaluations by EPAU and decentralized units would be. The evaluation plan prepared by EPAU should be submitted to the Executive Committee and to the Standing Committee for comments.

14. Ms. WYRSCH (Deputy High Commissioner) said that it was difficult to indicate at the moment what percentage of the budget would be allocated to evaluation activities. It would first be necessary to order the various activities before being able to cost them. It should be possible to provide an estimate in 2002. The link between assessment and oversight would be facilitated by the fact that the Chief of the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit would form part of the oversight body responsible for coordinating results of the various audits, inspections and monitoring exercises.

15. Mr. CRISP (Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit) said that the number of evaluations scheduled by the Unit had been reduced. Evaluation policy would be reviewed on an ongoing basis in the light of experience and revised if implementation resulted in too heavy a burden on the Unit. Senior staff would be accountable for follow-up to evaluations. An innovative approach would be required regarding follow-up to the evaluations of activities for refugee women and children; meetings would be held on that matter in coming months. UNHCR, with the financial assistance of a State member of the Executive Committee, had carried out studies

on education for refugee children, soon to be issued in a docucment. The Evaluation Advisory Committee was not a management body, but it was clear that there must be ongoing coordination between the Committee and senior management.

16. Ms. VERHEY (Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit) said that the study on the impact of activities for refugee children had led to the formulation of new evaluation models. She suggested that the pilot committee established for that evaluation should continue to function within UNHCR to facilitate follow-up.

17. Ms. WEISS FAGEN (Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit) said that the evaluation of activities for women refugees, which had been the subject of intensive cooperation by all concerned, would inevitably require follow-up since it raised the question of the desirability of a review of the guidelines for the protection of women refugees.

18. The CHAIRMAN said that the Executive Committee had concluded its consideration of agenda item 7 and would take up items 8 and 9 together at the following meeting.

The meeting rose at 4.10 p.m.